

The Literature of Destruction

Jewish Responses to Catastrophe

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THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY

PHILADELPHIA • NEW YORK • JERUSALEM 5748/1988

X

Anatomies of Revolutionary Violence

Something was happening to the insular mode of Jewish response to catastrophe. Ever since Reb Moshe enlightened Mendele about the edicts of Bismarck and the nature of anti-Semitism (40), there was a shift to a more outer-directed, politically motivated form of group behavior. By the time of the Kishinev pogrom thirteen years later, the Jewish socialists and Zionists were already squaring off over the proper response to tsarist repression. Both sides called for self-defense, but the Bund threw in its lot with the "workers of the world," whereas the Union of Hebrew Writers saw national self-determination as the only way to secure Jewish life. In the literature, however, these radical solutions were still transposed into an internal debate between the prophet and his people, the prophet and his God.

Not so in the wake of the Revolution of 1905, which began and ended with a bloodbath. For only one day of that fateful year, October 17, was there rejoicing in the streets. On that day the tsar granted Russia its first constitution promising a degree of civil liberty. It was followed, on October 18, by a wave of counterrevolutionary pogroms.

Jewish life in Russia exploded, first with the hope of salvation, then with the terror of mob violence. How this centrifugal force was played out in the collective and individual Jewish psyche is graphically illustrated in the three prose works that follow. Weissenberg's Yiddish novella (48) appeared within a year of the events described, yet the work actually telescoped a decade of radicalization in the shtetl, or Jewish market town, of eastern Europe. Weissenberg's nameless shtetl modeled on his native

it specialized in the production of ready-made boots in factories whose primitive working conditions had not changed for centuries; second, these boots were produced for export to the nearby city of Warsaw, the political nerve center of Poland. Sholem Aleichem's Heysen (49), in contrast, was vulnerable by virtue of its being linked by rail to other towns in the Ukraine, and the counterrevolution appealed most readily to the landless peasants who worked the railroad. Shapiro's setting (50), finally, was the most modern. In his "big city in southern Russia" (Yekaterinoslav, perhaps), a Jew had become so estranged from his family and community that he joined a Russian revolutionary cell and fell in love with its non-Jewish leader. Brutally reminded of his Jewishness by the pogrom, the hero—in the most shocking way—turned his anger on himself.

Because these stories were written at a time of great uncertainty in Russia, each writer was particularly hard-pressed to know how the story should end: Would the present period of political reaction give way to new reforms, or was this the beginning of the end?

Weissenberg viewed the shtetl as a microcosm of the community at large, corrupt and class-ridden. He was interested in exploring how violence begat more violence until both the shtetl oligarchy and the young workers were sucked into the maelstrom. Ultimately, their failure was eclipsed by the failure of the shtetl as a whole. So small and isolated a place could never be master of its own fate. Enemy forces were always waiting on the sidelines to quash any signs of autonomy. This is why Itchele's point of view in the story deserves special attention, as he alone foresees the outcome.

For Sholem Aleichem, the trains and telegrams merely masked the age-old plot of a last-minute "miracle" that thwarted the evil designs of local patriots and their debased lackeys. The real hero of the story was the narrator, the lively down-to-earth merchant from Heysen, whose upbeat manner of narration already bode well for the outcome. Meanwhile, that marvelous train, the Slowpoke Express, behaved as unpredictably as history itself. That a "miracle" could still be wrested out of secular violence was final proof of the story's desire for affirmation.

What is most startling about Shapiro's story, and what most troubled readers when it was first published in Yiddish in New York City, is that it, too, ends on a positive note that is meant to be taken seriously. It proclaims the birth of a Nietzschean man who has freed himself of all inhibitions and all the victimizations of his past, who has escaped from politics and civilization to return to something elemental and basic. His story, told through two narrators in a totally detached manner, is the story of a purgation. And it is the cross—the symbol that Jews have learned to fear the most—that marks his salvation: The cross is the *shel rosh*, the frontlet on his forehead, commanding him to remember; the cross is the symbol of the suffering Christ, and thus of his victimization; and the cross

is the sign of Cain, the mark of a murderer. In psychological and graphic detail unprecedented in Jewish fiction, Shapiro has drawn a man who has freed himself through violent action, who has successfully conquered that which was weak in him. Through the pogrom, an alienated intellectual has become a man of iron.

The symbol of the cross is only the most obvious subversion of religious imagery that occurs in these stories. Weissenberg sets the opening of his novella (not included here) during the twilight hour in the House of Study. Traditionally, this is the mellowest time of the day, when Jewish men gather round to tell stories and swap the latest news. Instead, it marks the first confrontation between the shtetl establishment and the young workers. And the fight breaks out about Passover, no less, the upcoming spring festival, which this year will usher in revolution instead of joy. Indeed, from this point onward, the ritual calendar, with its comforting flow of sacred time, will counteract the unpredictable violence of historical time. Everything comes together on the eve of Yom Kippur, in a brilliant description of ritual violence—the slaughtering of the atonement roosters—that harkens back to what has just happened in the shtetl proper and foreshadows the pogroms still to come from the world outside. Finally, Yekl returns to the scene of his initial defeat, this time to oust the rabbi with the shout: "No psalms! . . . Only arms, real arms!" The inner sanctum, where the recitation of Psalms is a sign of simple piety, has been violated by the enemy within. Then comes the enemy from without to put an end to the whole charade.

Sholem Aleichem's subversion is typically more subtle and playful than that. It operates solely on the level of language. When the Cossacks arrive in the eleventh hour, they do so, according to the witty narrator, "*uksomim beyodom*, with whips in their hands." But the Hebrew phrase actually means "with divination in their power (hand)" (Num. 22:7), which harks back to another ambiguous threat to the safety of the Jewish people, that which Balak tried to deliver through the mouth of Balaam. What a perfect analogy to the sight of Cossacks arriving in town not to wreak havoc themselves, but as instruments of the law!

49 The Wedding That Came Without Its Band

SHOLEM ALEICHEM

"I do believe I promised to tell you about another of our Slowpoke's miracles, thanks to which ~~don't you know~~ we were saved from a horrible fate. If you'd like to hear about it, why don't you stretch out on this seat and I'll lie down on that one. That way we'll both be more comfortable."

So said my friend, the merchant from Heysen, as we were traveling one day on the narrow-gauge train called the Slowpoke Express. And since this time too we were all by ourselves in the car, which was rather hot, we took off our jackets, unbuttoned our vests, and made ourselves right at home. I let him tell his story

Trains & History

Slowpoke = a "Jewish" train

off the beaten track

Never in a hurry

setting for long stories, intimate conversation

"miracles" can still happen

technological equivalent of Kasrilevke

Euphemistic
reference to the
pogroms of 1905.

Literally, the few
[Polish] squires.

in his jovial, unhurried manner, making a few mental notes as he did so that I could write it down later in his own words.

"Once upon a time . . . it happened a while ago, back in the days of the Constitution," when we Jews were getting the glad hand. Actually, though, we in Heysen were never afraid of a pogrom. Shall I tell you why not? For the simple reason that there was no one to do the job. Of course, I don't mean to suggest that if you looked hard enough, you couldn't have found a few public-spirited citizens who would have welcomed the chance to dust off a Jew or two, that is, to break all our bones—the proof of it being don't you know that when the glad tidings began to arrive from other places, some of our local patriots^o dashed off a secret message to whoever they thought it might concern: seeing as how, they wrote, it was time to stand up and be counted in Heysen too, where there was a dearth of volunteers, could they please be sent reinforcements in a hurry. . . . And don't you know that twenty-four hours hadn't gone by when word reached us Jews, and again in strictest secrecy, that the reinforcements were already on their way. Where were they coming from? From Zhmerinka, and from Kazatin, and from Razdyelne, and from Popelne, and from a few other places that were equally famous for their roughnecks. How, you ask, did we get wind of such a top secret? The answer don't you know is that we had a hidden agent, a fellow called Noyach Tonkonog. Who was this Tonkonog? I'll try to describe him for you, because being a traveler in these parts, you may run into him some day.

"Noyach Tonkonog is a Jew who grew more up than out. And since God gave him a pair of long legs, he learned to put them to good use. He's always on the run and hardly ever at home. He's got a thousand irons in the fire, most of them not his own. His own business, that is, is a printshop. And because it's the only one in Heysen, he rubs elbows with government officials, and with our local gentry, and with all kinds of people in high places.

"It was Noyach who broke the good news to us. That is, he personally spread it around town by whispering in everyone's ear, 'This is strictly for your private consumption, because I'd never tell anyone else. . . .' Before long the word had traveled like wildfire that hooligans were being brought in to attack the Jews. We even knew the exact hour of the attack and the direction it would come from—it was all planned like a military operation. Well, there was great gloom in Heysen, don't you know! And it was the poor who panicked the most. That's not what you'd normally expect, is it? After all, it makes more sense for a rich Jew to be scared to death of such a thing, because he's liable to be cleaned out of house and home. If you own nothing to begin with, on the other hand, why worry? What's there to lose? Still, you should have seen them drop everything, grab their children, and run pell-mell for cover. . . . Just where, you ask, does a Jew hide in Heysen? Either in the cellar of a friendly Russian, or in the attic of the town notary, or wherever the owner puts you in his factory. And in fact, everyone managed to find a place. There was only one Jew who didn't bother, and you're looking at him right now. I'm not trying to boast, mind you, but you'll see if you think about it that I had logic on my side. In the first place, what good does it do to be afraid of a pogrom? You either live through it or you don't. . . . And secondly, even assuming that I'm no braver than the next man, and that, when push comes to shove, I'd like to be someplace safe myself, where, I ask you, is safe? Whose word do I have that, in all the excitement, the same friendly Russian, or town notary,

indiv vs.
collective

or factory owner isn't going to . . . do you follow me? And besides, how can you just go and abandon a whole town? It's no trick to skedaddle—the whole point is to stay and do something! . . . Of course, you may object, that's easy to say, but what exactly can a Jew do? Well, I'll tell you what: a Jew can find a string to pull. I suppose there's someone with the right sort of influence where you come from, too. In Heysen he's called Nachman Kasso, a contractor with a round beard, a silk vest, and a big house all his own. And because he builds roads, he was on good terms with the prefect of the district, who even used to have him over for tea. This prefect, don't you know, was quite a decent goy. In fact, he was a prince of a goy! Why do I say that? Because he had his price, if you paid it through Nachman Kasso. That is, he was perfectly willing to accept gifts from anyone (why be rude, after all?), but he liked getting them from Nachman best of all. There's something about a contractor, don't you know. . .

"In short, I fixed things via Nachman, drew up a list of donors, and managed to raise the funds—and a tidy little sum it was too, don't you know because you couldn't cross a prefect's palm in such a matter without giving it some good scratch . . . in return for which, he did his best to reassure us that we could sleep calmly that night because nothing would happen to us at all. Fair enough, no? The only trouble was that we still had our secret agent, whose reports went from bad to worse; the latest of them, which he of course passed on in such strict confidence, that it was all over town in no time flat, was that he, Noyach Tonkonog, had personally seen a telegram that he very much wished he hadn't. What was in it? Just one word, but a most unpleasant one: yedyem, it said—here we come! Back to our prefect we ran. 'Your Excellency, it looks bad!' 'How come?' 'There's a telegram.' 'From whom?' 'The same people.' 'What's in it?' 'Yedyem!' You should have heard him laugh. 'You're bigger fools than I thought,' he said. 'Why, just yesterday I ordered a company of Cossacks from Tulczyn for your protection. . . .' Well, that put some spunk in us, don't you know: a Jew only needs to see a Cossack to feel so courageous that he's ready to take on the whole world! It was nothing to sneeze at, a bodyguard like that. . .

"In short, there was just one question: who would arrive first, the Cossacks from Tulczyn or the roughnecks from Zhmerinka? It stood to reason that the roughnecks would, since they were traveling by train while the Cossacks were on horseback. But we had our hopes pinned on our Slowpoke: God was great, and the only miracle we asked of Him was to make the train a few hours late, which it usually was anyway, in fact, nearly every day. . . . Yet for once, don't you know, as though out of spite, the Slowpoke was right on time: it pulled in and out of each station like clockwork. You can imagine how it made our blood run cold to hear from our secret agent that another yedyem telegram had arrived from Krishtopovka, the last station before Heysen—and this time, for good measure, the yedyem had a yahoo after it. . . . Naturally, we went right to the prefect with the news, threw ourselves at his feet, and begged him not to count on the Cossacks from Tulczyn and, if only for appearances' sake, to send a detachment of police to the station so that the hooligans shouldn't think the only law was that of the jungle. His Excellency didn't let us down. In fact, he quite rose to the occasion. What do I mean by that? I mean, he put on his full dress uniform with all its medals and went off to the station with the entire police force to meet the train.

"But our local patriots, don't you know, weren't caught napping either. They

rich vs.
poor
Tow vs. Gentle

(R)

heavy iron

technology
vs
cavalry

had also put on their best clothes and their medals, taken along a pair of priests for good luck, and gone off to meet the train at the station—where, in fact, they asked the prefect what he was doing there, which was the exact same question he asked them. A few words were exchanged, and the prefect made it clear that they were wasting their time. As long as he was in charge, he said, there would be no pogroms in Heysen. He read them the riot act, but they just grinned back at him and even had the cheek to answer, 'We'll soon see who's in charge around here. . . .' Just then a whistle was heard. It made our hearts skip a beat. We were all waiting for it to blow again, followed by a loud 'Yahoo!'—and what that 'Yahoo!' meant, don't you know we already knew from other towns. . . . Would you like to hear the end of it, though? There was a second whistle, all right, but there never was any 'Yahoo.' Why not? It could only have happened on our Slowpoke. Listen to this.

7 "The driver pulled into Heysen station, climbed out of the engine full of prunes, and headed straight for the buffet as usual. 'Just a minute, old man,' he was asked. 'Where's the rest of the train?' 'What rest of the train?' he said. 'Do you mean to say you didn't notice,' he was asked, 'that your engine wasn't pulling any cars?' That driver, he just stared at them and said: 'What do I care about cars? That's the crew's job.' 'But where's the crew?' he was asked. 'How should I know?' he answered. 'The conductor whistles that he's ready, I whistle back that I am too, and off I go. I don't have eyes in the back of my head to see what's following behind me. . . .' So he said, the driver—there was nothing wrong with his logic. In a word, it was pointless to argue: the Slowpoke had arrived without its passengers like a wedding without its band. . . .

"As we found out later, that train was carrying a merry gang of young bucks, the pick of the crop, each man jack of them, and in full battle gear too, with clubs, and tar, and what-have-you. They were in a gay old mood, don't you know, and the vodka flowed like water, and when they reached their last station, that is to say, Krishtopovka, they had themselves such a blast that the whole train crew got drunk too, the conductor and the stoker and even the policeman—in consequence of which, one little detail was forgotten: to hitch up the locomotive again. And so, right on schedule, the driver took off in it for Heysen while the rest of the Slowpoke, don't you know, remained standing on the tracks in Krishtopovka! Better yet, nobody—neither the roughnecks, nor the other passengers, nor even the train crew—noticed what had happened. They were all so busy emptying glasses and killing bottles that the first they knew about it was when the station-master happened to look out the window and see the cars standing by themselves. Did he raise Cain! And when the rest of the station found out, all hell broke loose: the pogromchiks blamed the train crew, and the train crew blamed the pogromchiks, and they went at it hot and heavy until they realized that there was nothing to do but shoulder their legs and tote them all the way to Heysen. What other choice did they have? And that's exactly what they did: they rallied round the flag and hotfooted it to Heysen, where they arrived safe and sound, don't you know, singing and yahooping for God and country. Shall I tell you something, though? They got there a little too late. The streets were already patrolled by mounted Cossacks from Tulczyn, who clearly had the whip hand—and I do mean whips! It didn't take those hooligans half an hour to clear out of town down to the last

man. They vanished, don't you know, like a pack of hungry mice, or like snow on a hot summer's day. . . .

"Well now, suppose you tell me: shouldn't our Slowpoke be plated with gold, or at least written up in the papers?"

1909

50 The Cross

LAMED SHAPIRO

1

How shall I describe him? A giant of a man, huge bulk, broad shoulders, but not stout. Indeed he was gaunt. His countenance dark, sunburned, with high cheekbones and black eyes. His hair was completely gray, yet made him seem youthful—thick, shaggy, slightly curly. A child's smile on his lips contrasted with an old man's tiny wrinkles around his eyes.

Then I saw his wide forehead. It was marked with a sharply cut brown cross, a shallow wound—two knife cuts, crossing each other.

We met on the roof of a railroad car racing along on the East Coast of the United States. Since the two of us were tramping across the country, we decided to team up until we got fed up with each other's company. I knew he was a Russian Jew, like myself; I asked no further questions. No passports are necessary for the kind of life we lead.

That summer we saw almost every state in the Union. During the day we usually walked, cutting across forests, bathing in rivers we found on the way. We got food from the farmers. Some we were given and some we stole—chickens, geese, ducks, which we roasted over a campfire in a forest or on the prairie. But some days we had no choice; we had to make do with gooseberries we picked in the woods.

We slept wherever we happened to be at nightfall—out in the open fields or under a tree in a grove. On dark nights we sometimes "hopped" a train, climbing on top of a railroad car to hitch a ride. As the train sped along, a stiff wind blasted into our faces, carrying smoke from the locomotive, fumes and puffs dappled with great sparks. The prairie glided and rambled around us, breathing deeply, speaking softly and quickly, with sundry sounds in many tongues. Distant galaxies sparkled over our heads, and thoughts drifted across our minds—such strange thoughts, as wild and free as the voices of the prairie. They seemed disconnected, and yet they seemed intertwined, linked and chained together. In the cars beneath us people were sitting or lying, many people whose paths were marked out and whose thoughts were closed off. They knew where they were coming from and where they were going; they told these things to one another, yawned and went to bed, unaware that two unfeathered "birds" were perched above them, resting